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SUBJECT: SINGAPORE'S ASIA-MIDDLE EAST DIALOGUE

REF: SINGAPORE 887

Classified By: E/P Counselor Laurent Charbonnet, Reasons 1.4(b)(d)

[11.](#) (C) Summary: As part of its effort to be a bridge between the Middle East and Asia, Singapore is sponsoring an Asia-Middle East dialogue (AMED) in June. AMED is intended to promote economic interaction between Asia and the Middle East, and to provide a platform for "moderate" Muslims from both regions to share progressive ideas. The forum will focus on security issues, economic reform, and exchanges. With some 50 countries involved, AMED is a positive initiative that could advance some of our own goals for economic reform and modernization in the Middle East. End Summary.

#### A Forum for Mainstream Muslims

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[12.](#) (U) As part of its drive to expand links with the Arab world (reftel), Singapore will host an Asia-Middle East dialogue (AMED) on June 21-22, 2005. Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong first mooted this dialogue last year as a "platform for progressive Muslim voices" and to showcase the "success stories" he found in places such as UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain. AMED will be open to both government and non-governmental organizations, and the GOS hopes political leaders, opinion makers, think tank representatives, and scientists will participate. While Zainul Arif Mantaha, the MFA official charged with organizing AMED, characterized AMED as a Track II approach, all participants will have to be cleared by their respective national foreign ministries.

[13.](#) (C) The GOS has two goals for AMED: to increase collaboration--especially economic--between Asia and the Middle East, and to provide Southeast Asia's mainstream Muslims the opportunity to influence their brethren in the Middle East, Zainul told poloffs. AMED will also help the GOS understand and identify moderate Muslims. Several regional security specialists at government-linked think tanks have stated that AMED, along with the GOS, overall outreach to the Middle East, reflects an effort by Singapore to "do its part" in supporting moderate Muslims and encouraging reform in the Arab world. According to SM Goh, Singapore and Asia provide a different development model for the Middle East that may be more acceptable to Muslims than the western version. Singapore implicitly hopes its example may reassure Middle Eastern governments they can combine economic liberalization and growth with firm social and political control. The GOS believes that governments in Asia and the Middle East are grappling with similar challenges: "how to cope with globalization, how to loosen up controls, how to manage a population that is more affluent and wants more say, how to maintain traditional values in a fast-changing environment," according to Zainul. AMED will be a platform for exchanging "fresh ideas" for coping with these challenges and will support the reform efforts of a new generation of western-educated Muslim leaders who are "more enlightened" and "want to take their countries in a different direction," he added.

[14.](#) (C) The event is open to approximately 50 countries in Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. It will include ASEAN plus three, the Arab League, the Central Asian republics, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan. Australia, New Zealand, and the United States are not invited. AMED's steering committee includes Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and Bangladesh; Indonesia and Saudi Arabia have been invited to join and have unofficially accepted. Singapore hopes that by including Saudi Arabia on the steering committee it will not "work against" AMED. Furthermore, Zainul explained that the GOS wants to engage Saudi Arabia, which is influential in Southeast Asia, and encourage the kingdom to see itself as part of the international community. Egypt will host the second AMED in 2007, and Thailand has already signaled its interest in hosting it in 2009.

#### Setting the Agenda

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[15.](#) (SBU) There will be three main topics for the dialogue: 1) security, 2) economic cooperation, especially with East Asia, and the ASEAN model of liberalization and economic integration, and 3) social, cultural, and educational exchange. There will be three concurrent panels (a la Davos)

on each topic. The three security panels will be on political change and reform, counterterrorism cooperation, and global energy security. The three economic subtopics are deeper cooperation through economic agreements, a business panel on identifying growth sectors, and a panel for the financial sector emphasizing Islamic financial products. The third topic will have panels on developing human resources, science and technology (trying to introduce the idea of technology to more conservative societies), and "tradition and modernism." The subtext of this last panel is the role of Islam in development.

16. (C) Comment: While its ambitious scale may make it unwieldy, AMED is a positive initiative on Singapore's part, and will provide a framework for moderates in the Middle East and Asia to engage on a comprehensive array of issues. Although the GOS is promoting AMED for its own reasons, and does not seek U.S. involvement, AMED may advance some of our own goals for economic reform, development, and modernization in the Middle East. End Comment.  
LAVIN